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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an approach to teacher evaluation intended to establish a meaningful link between classroom observations and teacher development. In this approach, observations are always announced. They last for the duration of the teaching hour and constitute one link in a three-part observation cycle. The pre-observation session with the teacher is intended to negotiate the observation focus and decide upon a data gathering method. The observation is intended to compile data about the lesson, emphasizing the previously selected observation focus. The post-observation conference, which should occur within 2-3 days, is devoted to interpreting data gathered during the observation. This approach to observation is cyclical, systematic, and purposeful, ensuring a meaningful link between observations and allowing the supervisor and teacher to identify specific areas for observation and follow-up activities based on the individual teacher's needs and abilities. The process uses regular class visits as the foundation for formative and individualized long-term planning of teacher development. The core of the teacher's annual appraisal is derived by examining progress made from the beginning of the process to the point at which the rating is due. (SM)

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Facilitating Teacher Development Through Supervisory Class Observations

Grazyna M. Dudney

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FACILITATING TEACHER DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SUPERVISORY CLASS OBSERVATIONS

Introduction

Many of us consider formal supervisory class observations as a painful requirement, often associated with a high degree of ambiguity, discomfort, & anxiety on the part of both the supervisor & the observed teacher. This feeling is usually aggravated if observations are done randomly without much communication between the observer & the teacher before & after the observation. The teacher instinctively knows that each observed class will somehow appear on an annual performance evaluation. Yet the teacher typically has no opportunity to receive feedback or to explain his or her rationale for classroom decisions, which--if considered by the observer--might alter the outcome of the lesson evaluation. Teachers then conclude that the supervisor's goal is to catch them off guard & the negative cycle thus begins.

The supervisor also feels pressure since evaluating the act of teaching is itself a very complex task requiring specialized skills. It is virtually impossible to capture the essence of the instruction in an objective manner unless the observer & the teacher share at least part of the instructional context that determines the teacher's long term objectives & day-to-day teaching decisions. Without that context the observer is limited to the "what" & "how" of the observed lesson but is unable to access the "why" without a high degree of speculation & subjective interpretation. In order to try to understand the rationale for what happened in the observed class, the supervisor relies not on the teacher's explanation but on perceptions stemming from his own past teaching & learning experiences. These "ghosts behind the blackboard" (Wajnryb, 1992, p. 13) can color the supervisor's evaluation of the lesson.

Supervisory observations can be successfully demystified & can become a positive experience for both the teacher & the supervisor in spite of the ever-present element of evaluation. If done systematically with open lines of communication, they can serve as a powerful professional development tool for both the teacher and the supervisor. The enhanced quality of classroom instruction can in turn lead to a general language program improvement of a branch, department, or school. Below is a description of an approach that I consider most

conducive to establishing a meaningful link between classroom observations and teacher development. I have found it very successful in the programs I worked with as Polish department Chair & Dean of the European & Latin American School at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, California.

The observation cycle

In this approach, observations are always announced. They last for the duration of the teaching hour & constitute one link in a three – part observation cycle, which consists of a *pre-observation session* with the teacher, an *observation*, and a *post-observation conference*. The purpose of the pre-observation session is typically twofold. First, it is to negotiate the observation focus, that is, the specific aspect of the teacher's teaching on which the observer will primarily concentrate. Areas for an observation focus could be, for example, the distribution of class time among students, time spent on task, the amount of target language used in class, error correction techniques, time management strategies, or the use of cognitive strategies in the context of a language task. The selection of the observation focus is usually driven by the teacher's or the supervisor's concern about an area of the teacher's or students' performance and is followed by a decision about which hour of instruction will be observed. The second goal of the pre–observation session is to decide on a data gathering method best suited to capturing information in support of the focus. An in-depth discussion of data gathering techniques goes beyond the scope of this article; however, excellent insights and information on the topic can be found in numerous publications. Some of the best resources in this area are Richards, J. and Lockhart, C. (1994); Richards, J. and Nunan, D. (1990); Acheson, K. and Damien Gall M. (1997); and Wajnryb, R. (1992).

During the observation, the supervisor should follow basic rules of observation etiquette, such as being on time, appearing neutral and pleasant, not interfering with the teaching, and being as unobtrusive as possible, to name just a few. The purpose of the observation is to compile data about the lesson, paying special attention to the previously selected observation focus. This is a very important first step in the evaluation process. Evaluation cannot be valid unless it is based on an accurate and objective record. Therefore it is important for the observer

to concentrate only on gathering and recording data during the observation and not to try to fill out an evaluation form simultaneously. After the lesson, the observer should spend some time organizing and analyzing the data, filling out an evaluation report, and preparing a plan for the post-observation conference.

The post-observation conference should take place no later than two or three days after the observation to ensure that details from the observed lesson are still remembered. The post-observation session is devoted to interpreting the data gathered during the observation, (which should include opportunities for the teacher to expand on his or her decision-making process during the lesson), providing feedback to the teacher, and working out an action plan. The action plan will normally relate directly to the agreed upon observation focus and will give the teacher specific tasks to accomplish before the next observation. As part of the action plan, for example, the teacher might agree to make a recording or a videotape of his or her class and prepare an in-depth analysis of a selected area of teaching. Other possibilities might be taking a workshop, reading an article, setting up and carrying out action research, preparing a detailed lesson plan that is to be reviewed with the supervisor before instruction, or arranging for a reciprocal peer observation with another colleague. As part of the post-observation conference, the supervisor and the teacher agree on the purpose of the action plan and on how it will lead into the next observation.

Documentation of the observation cycle is carried out on an observation form capturing the main points from the pre-observation session (including the observation focus), data from the observation, and conclusions from the post-observation conference with plans for the next observation. It is important for the teacher to receive a copy of the filled out observation form. The supervisor should keep a class observation record for each individual teacher under his or her supervision. These records can also be included in a more comprehensive portfolio maintained by the teacher that includes other records of the teacher's accomplishments, such as articles written, presentations given, and other academic recognition.

The approach to observations described here is cyclical, systematic, and purposeful. It ensures that there is a meaningful link between observations. It allows the supervisor and the teacher to identify specific areas for observation and follow-up activities that are based on each individual teacher's needs and abilities. This focused activity, then, contributes to the long range,

individualized development plan for each teacher as well as to more specific short-term goals. Because of its orientation towards the future, the approach is formative rather than summative in nature. The observed hour of instruction is not the end of the observation cycle but serves as a springboard for continued development.

Figure 1

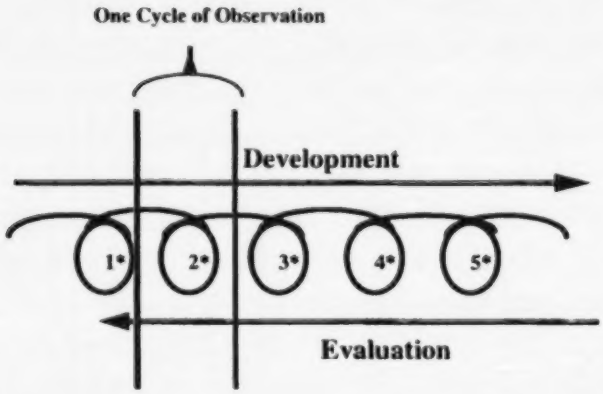

Figure 1: The Process of Teacher Development Through Classroom Observations

*** An observation**

Choosing a variety of feedback options--such as directive, alternative, & non-directive (Freeman, 1990)--as part of the communication process for pre- & post-observation sessions creates an atmosphere conducive to maintaining an ongoing dialog about teaching principles and practices and more readily leads to classroom experimentation.

The role of evaluation

The fact that evaluation is an integral part of supervisory classroom observations can sometimes get in the way of the process of teacher development, especially if the supervisor relies solely on a summative approach. A cyclical, systematic approach to observations does not diminish the role of evaluation; however, it makes it multidimensional and less threatening. Figure 1 illustrates the interdependence of teacher evaluation and development in the context of

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formative supervisory class observations. Instead of using isolated class visits as the primary building blocks for the teacher's appraisal, it uses regular class visits as the foundation for formative and individualized long-term planning of teacher development. The core of the teacher's annual appraisal is then derived not from the number of deficiencies observed, but from the progress the teacher made from the beginning of the process to the point at which the rating is due.

Conclusion

The approach to classroom observations described above lends itself to creating an atmosphere of trust and cooperation in an organization. It communicates the high value of professional development and by focusing on reflection, communication, and professional inquiry, it allows both the teacher and supervisor to become not only better at what they are doing but also to enjoy it more.

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